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Montana Visitor Information Centers

A Report to the 52nd Legislature

Montana Department of Commerce

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STAN STEPHENS, GOVERNOR

CHARLES A. BROOKE, DIRECTOR

MONTANA DEPARTMENT OF COMMERCE

1424 9TH AVENUE
HELENA, MONTANA 59620-0501
(406) 444-3494 FAX: (406) 444-2903

December 21, 1990

Honorable Members of the 52nd Legislative Session:

In response to House Bill 550 as passed by the 51st session of the Montana Legislature, the Department of Commerce has prepared the following report on the feasibility of constructing and operating Visitor Information Centers at strategic locations around the state.

This report was requested and prepared out of a recognition of the growing importance of tourism and recreation to the Montana economy. To further enhance the growing success of Montana's tourism promotion (primarily done through out-of-state advertising and publicity), it has become apparent that additional means are needed to provide our visitors from out-of-state with detailed information about Montana services and attractions.

The use of Visitor Information Centers in other states has clearly demonstrated their ability to meet this need and to enhance the economic impact of out-of-state visitors through extended stays, visits to additional attractions, and return visits to the state.

As this report will demonstrate, the Visitor Information Center concept clearly represents an important "next step" in enhancing the effectiveness and sophistication of the overall marketing strategy for tourism and recreation in Montana.

This report is very respectfully submitted for your consideration.

Sincerely,

Charles A. Brooke
Director

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Preface

This document represents fulfillment of the mandate in HB 550, passed by the 1989 Montana Legislature. The feasibility study was conducted by the Institute for Tourism and Recreation Research at the University of Montana under the direction of Travel Montana, Department of Commerce. The study involved a number of organizations, all of whom deserve thanks:

Beaverhead Chamber of Commerce
Beaverhead County
Big Horn County
Big Horn County Historical Museum
Bureau of Land Management
Culbertson Museum Club
Governor's Tourism Advisory Council
Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks
Montana Department of Highways
Montana State University -- School of Architecture
National Park Service
Shelby Chamber of Commerce
Shelby, City of
St. Regis
Toole County
U.S. Forest Service
West Yellowstone, City of
Wibaux Chamber of Commerce
Wibaux, City of
Wibaux County

Montana Visitor Information Centers
A Report to the 52nd Legislature

Highlights:

❒ Seven Visitor Information Centers are proposed at state entrances on highways I-90 West, I-90 East, I-15 North, I-15 South, I-94, US 191, and US 2 East.

❒ The Centers would provide information about Montana services and attractions.

❒ Centers would provide state-of-the-art displays about Montana's natural, cultural and historical heritage.

❒ When fully operational, the Visitor Information Centers would have the potential to generate more than $15 million in economic impacts from additional non-resident spending.

❒ Funding for construction and operation would come from partnerships between public agencies and the private sector.

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Information Contact:
Travel Montana
Department of Commerce
1424 9th Avenue
Helena, MT 59620
(406) 444-2654

Introduction

Background and Purpose

HB 550, passed by the Montana Legislature in 1989, requires the state Department of Commerce to develop a plan for a system of Visitor Information Centers (VIC) in Montana for presentation to the 1991 Legislature. The plan is to examine the feasibility of constructing and operating a system of VICs, the most beneficial and effective sites for the VICs, the land needed for the centers and its estimated cost, architectural designs, suggested staffing and operating plan, and a formal proposal for funding the construction, maintenance, and operation of the centers. This report presents the Department's response to that mandate.

The overall purpose of the Visitor Information Center system presented here is to offer visitors entering Montana an introduction to the state and its individual regions, its historical, cultural and natural heritage, information about destinations and attractions, recreational opportunites, accommodations, and other travel services.

This information would not only help provide a high quality experience for visitors, it would also influence their decisions about what to see and visit and how long to stay in Montana The ultimate objective of the VIC system is to slow people down during their travel through Montana, thereby providing significant benefits to the state's economy.

A system of VICs would complement existing Travel Montana out-of-state promotional programs by providing more specific information to visitors once they arrive in the state. VIC staff would be well-versed and knowledgeable about regional opportunities and would be able to provide accurate and up-to-date information at an important decision point in visitors' trips. Because one of the VIC's major objectives would be to interpret the state and region, the VIC themselves would be attractions.

While VICs would be located on major highways entering Montana and would serve as highway rest areas, they would not be limited-access Interstate rest areas. Instead, where VICs are to be located along Interstates (5 of 7 instances), they would be sited just off of existing Interstate exits, thus making them more "community-based" facilities. Travelers wishing to visit the centers would need to exit from the Interstate, increasing the chance that they would spend time in the community. This possibility should increase community support for the VIC, make it easier to staff, and reduce construction costs.

A technical Steering Committee provided overall guidance for the project and was comprised of representatives of Travel Montana, the University of Montana (ITRR), Montana State University (School of Architecture), Montana Department of Highways, Montana Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks, U.S. Forest Service (Northern Region) and the Governor's Tourism Advisory Council.

The overall purpose of a Visitor Information Center system is to offer visitors entering Montana an introduction to the state and its individual regions, its historical, cultural, and natural heritage . . .

Effects of VICs On Travelers And Their Expenditures

Research in other states shows that Visitor Information Centers can have a profound effect on travelers. These effects can, in turn, have significant economic impacts. Information distributed at a Visitor Information Center has three major effects: 1) increased lengths of stay, 2) increased number of visits at attractions and destinations, and 3) increased spending.

Length of Stay

A recent study of visitors to Colorado's Welcome Centers shows how these effects occur(1). Visitors' primary reasons for stopping at Welcome Centers was to obtain information, specifically information on attractions and special events. Overall, 98% of respondents actually did request information at the Welcome Center. The vast majority of Welcome Center users planned to use the information on their current trip; 82% also planned to use it in the future, and 79% planned to share it with friends and relatives.

One reason information disseminated at the Welcome Centers was so effective was that 69% of all respondents said their travel itinerary was either flexible or very flexible; 45% of visitors decided to visit an attraction after arriving in the state. About 30% of Welcome Center users were first-time visitors to Colorado.

About 13% of Welcome Center users said they stayed longer because of the information and services available at the Center -- an average of 2.2 days longer. A study of Virginia Welcome Center users showed that 11% stayed an average of 1.5 nights longer in the state that non-Center users (2). A Michigan study reported that 13% of Welcome Center visitors extended their stay in that state an average of 4.4 days (3).

Experience in other states suggests that about 12% of visitors stopping at a Visitor Information Center will stay 1.5 nights longer in the state.

More Visits to Attractions

The Colorado study reported that 67% of the users said the stop at the Welcome Center influenced their trip in some way. The most common results were visiting new areas (41%) and visiting new attractions/special events (32%). The Michigan study reported that 74% of Welcome Center users were influenced; 59% said they visited areas they had not previously planned on visiting.

Economic Impacts

The Colorado Study reported that for every dollar spent on operating a Welcome Center, an additional $46.50 in visitor expenditures was generated. Most of this increased spending resulted from the longer lengths of stay.

Research completed in Nebraska found that of travel-through visitors entering the state with no plans to visit an attraction, those who did make one or more unplanned or impulse visits spent significantly more money than those who did not, even when controlling for length of stay and party size. The author states that the "results appear to support in-state promotional programs, such as interstate visitor information and sign systems" (4).

Well-informed staff would direct visitors to destinations and attractions that they might not be aware of or give them additional information about places they already have selected. Visitors returning home would then be more likely to "spread the word" about Montana and could take back promotional literature about the state .

Potential Economic Impact

Research conducted in other states can be used to estimate the economic impact of a Visitor Information Center system in Montana. Briefly, based on 1990 traffic counts for the seasons suggested for each VIC, Visitor Information Centers at the seven proposed entrances would have the potential of generating approximately $7,900,000 in additional direct expenditures and $17,380,000 in total economic impact annually. (See Technical Appendix for calculations.)

Since approximately 25 percent of this economic impact translates into direct labor income for Montanans (5), a system of VICs could mean nearly $4.3 million in labor income annually for state residents as a result of increased visitor expenditures.

Goals and Objectives

A VIC system is designed to strengthen the tourism and recreation industry by providing appropriate information for visitors as they enter a state. Since visitors to Montana have already decided to visit the state, the primary focus of the information would be on the state and region, attractions and destinations, recreational activities and opportunities, accommodations, and other travel services. Research shows that many visitors are not aware of the number and variety of activities and experiences available in Montana (6). By providing this type of information, VICs could significantly influence visitors' travel decisions and itineraries on current and future trips.

More specifically, the VIC system's goals are to:

1) Enhance the quality of visitors' experiences while in Montana.

VICs would achieve this goal by providing interpretation of the state's cultural, historical, and natural heritage and information on attractions, destinations, opportunities, and services through a friendly, helpful, and informed staff and high quality interpretive displays.

2) Increase word-of-mouth promotion about Montana destinations.

Word-of-mouth or personal contact is the most effective method of influencing visitors' behavior and decisions about what to do, see, or visit. Staff at the VICs would be knowledgeable, courteous, and friendly; these characteristics would make the visitor's first contact with Montana a positive one.

Well-informed staff could direct visitors to destinations and attractions that they might not be aware of or give them additional information about places they already have selected. Visitors returning home would then be more likely to "spread the word" about Montana, and could take back promotional literature about the state to give to family and friends.

3) Improve visitors' images and perceptions of Montana as a vacation destination.

While this goal is also part of Travel Montana's marketing program, it would be an important dimension of the VIC program. The centers' interpretive component would be specifically directed at increasing visitors' knowledge of Montana.

Associated facilities and services, such as rest rooms, water fountains, picnic tables, and information on travel routes, road and weather conditions, and the wide variety of activitites and opportunities available, would enhance visitors' image of Montana as a friendly and desirable place to visit.

4) Increase visitors' length of stay and overall expenditures in Montana.

After receiving information on attractions, destinations, and opportunities, many visitors would visit more places and stay longer, thus increasing their overall expenditures in Montana. A significant portion of these increased expenditures would ultimately accrue to Montanans as labor income.

5) Increase the likelihood of visitors returning to Montana.

Achieving the above goals -- enhancing the quality of visits to Montana, improving visitors' perceptions of the state, and encouraging people to stay longer and get to know the state better -- would increase the likelihood of visitors returning to Montana.

Return visitors average longer lengths of stay than first-time visitors. By providing information about Montana to first-time visitors, the VICs would encourage them to return and stay longer on those return visits.

Annual visitation to the Montana Visitor Information system is estimated at just over one million people.

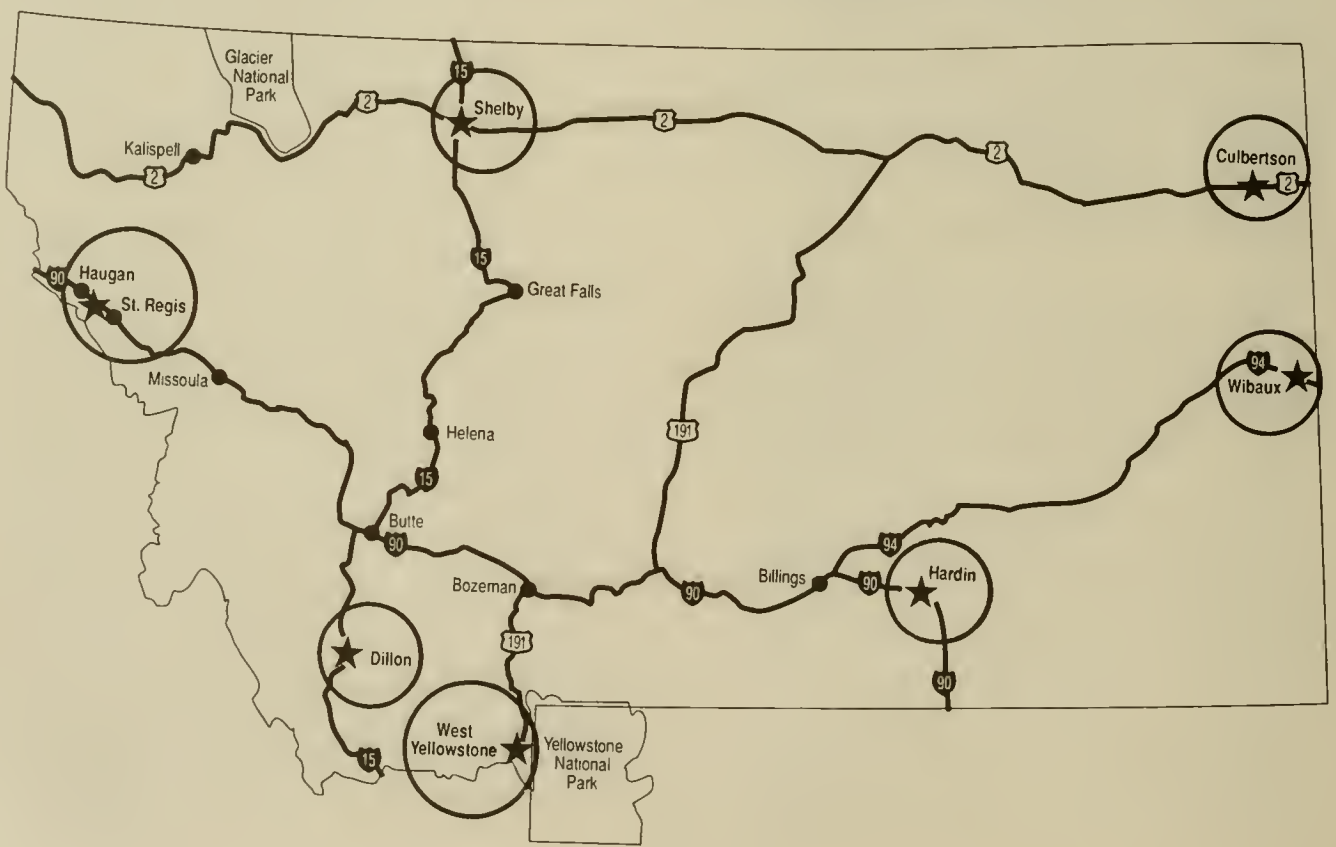
Additional non-resident expenditures from the system are estimated at $7 .9 million annually.

Site Selection Process

In order to objectively assess the many potential Visitor Information Center locations, the VIC Steering Committee developed a process that rated each location on a set of criteria. The criteria incorporated community support, technical advice and data, and a survey of communities. For a full description of the criteria and the entrance evaluations, see Technical Appendix D.

Twenty entrance locations were initially considered as potential sites for VICs. These sites were evaluated using several criteria, including estimated non-resident traffic volume, proximity to the state boundary, availability of volunteers to help in staffing, potential for joint funding, availability of land, and winter traffic volume. The Steering Committee helped conduct the evaluation and recommended entrances for further consideration.

Seven entrances were chosen for proposed Visitor Information Centers. These entrances are: Interstate 90 West and East, Interstate 15 North and South, Interstate 94, U.S. Highway 191 South, and U.S. Highway 2 East. Specific sites along each of these entrances were then evaluated. In each case, representatives from the community governments and/or Chambers of Commerce involved were consulted. Sites in the following communities were selected: Haugan/St. Regis area, Hardin, Shelby, Dillon, Wibaux, West Yellowstone, and Culbertson.



Information And Interpretation Program

In order to enhance the visitor's experience in Montana, two primary, interrelated functions would be provided -- information dissemination and interpretation.

Information would be provided through different media, including printed material that visitors could take with them, personal travel advice from VIC staff, visual displays, and video clips. Information would include recreational opportunities, attractions and destinations, accommodations, available services, travel routes, and road and weather conditions.

The Visitor Information Centers would also function as interpretive centers for the regions in which they were located, and for the state as a whole. This function complements the information dissemination function, as interpretation is one method of providing information. Interpretive exhibits would present themes and attractions in the region and state, including natural, historic, and cultural resources and attractions. The interpretive theme for each VIC would differ and reflect a cultural, historical, or natural heritage theme important to the region.

Following are some alternative themes for each of the VIC locations.

***I-15 North** (Shelby):* 1) Where the plains meet the Rockies; plants and animals. 2) The role of the railroad in shaping Montana.

***I-15 South** (Dillon):* 1) The role of the one-room schoolhouse in early Montana. 2) The gold boom in southwest Montana; tie-in to Bannack.

***I-94** (Wibaux):* 1) The role of the homesteader in shaping Montana. 2) The plains before the white man; Native Americans; native prairie plants and animals.

***I-90 East** (Hardin):* Early homesteaders and early Montana communities

***I-90 West** (Haugan-St. Regis area):* 1) The role of the U.S. Forest Service in the western U.S., past and present. 2) The Mullan Trail. 3) The role of natural fire, and the Forest Service tree nursery.

***Highway 191** (West Yellowstone):* The Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem.

Summary of Operating Plan

Overall administration of the VIC system would be provided by Travel Montana, Department of Commerce. Local communities, organizations and other appropriate state and federal agencies would join Travel Montana in cooperatively staffing and operating the centers. The specific arrangements would vary from site to site.

Staffing. VICs would be professionally staffed during all open hours. The staff would be a primary source of information for travelers, although information would be available in other forms as well, such as brochures, maps, and video. Interpretive displays would be designed both to be educational and to inform visitors about recreational opportunities and attractions.

The key to a successful VIC operation is a friendly, helpful and informed staff. Paid staff would be the rule at the VICs, although volunteers could also be used during peak periods. Supervisory staff would be expected to have some professional background, and all staff would participate in training.

Seasons.. The suggested seasons of operation vary from one VIC to the next, but generally the season would be either year-round for some Centers or April through October for others. The proposed seasons of operation were based on estimated visitation, economic benefits, and opportunity to extend Travel Montana' promotional effort.

Operating budget. Annual operating budgets likewise vary, ranging from $32,000 to $208,000 per VIC. The total annual operating budget for all VICs is estimated at $778,000.

Visitor Information Centers Funding Model

The ***construction funding expenses*** outlined below reflect the total estimated costs associated with creation of seven new Visitor Information Centers in Montana. The ***operational expenses*** reflect the estimated yearly costs of operating the seven centers. Both types of costs anticipate that the centers would be built and opened simultaneously. Technical Appendix F shows site-specific construction and operating costs.

Construction Funding

Numerous states with operational visitor information centers have used monies from their respective Department of Highways, most often tapping into I-4R funds made available for such construction by the federal government. Due to pending reductions in the Federal Highway Funding program, rural states like Montana may lose as much as $30 million to $50 million annually. In addition, the Montana Department of Highways may lose its share of coal tax revenue in 1993, which would further reduce its funding resources. With these funding considerations in mind, the Highway Department monies have not been identified as an optimum financing source.

The Department of Commerce, therefore, is suggesting a multi-agency and multi-organization funding and operational model. The following brief descriptions offer a suggested combination of funding partnerships for newly constructed Visitor Information Centers. Additional interested agencies may also become partners in any final funding model. Letters of support from several agency partners are shown in Technical Appendix H.

Building Construction – $4,189,900

Summary: This construction/remodeling estimate includes $3,809,000 for the construction of seven Visitor Information Centers, averaging 5,200 square feet. The estimate includes all costs of construction for the entire building, including $380,900 in architectural and engineering fees.
Suggested funding source: Coal tax funds.

Site Grading and Preparation – $76,000

Summary: This expense reflects the general site preparation as required by each site prior to construction of buildings and parking lots.
Suggested funding source: Local communities should be approached for funding and support.

Paving – $301,900

Summary: This cost reflects the initial paving of parking lots for the six new proposed sites.
Suggested funding source: Montana Department of Highways.

Site Development – $350,400

Summary: This cost includes picnic shelters, tables and benches (where proposed), garbage cans and racks, highway signs, sidewalks, and curbs and gutters for parking lots.
Suggested funding sources: A cost-sharing plan involving the U.S. Forest Service, local communities, private sector, and the Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks.

Landscaping – $169,700

Summary: This expense includes topsoil, seed and fertilizer, trees and shrubs, and an automated irrigation system for each of the six new proposed sites.
Suggested funding sources: Local communities should be approached and private sector participation encouraged to provide for these services.

Furnishings – $190,600

Summary: This cost reflects moveable items within each of the seven proposed sites. It includes couches, chairs, desks, lamps, and one photocopy machine and desktop computer for each site.
Suggested funding sources: A cost-sharing plan involving the Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks, Bureau of Land Management, and U.S. Forest Service.

Montana Exhibit – $650,000

Summary: The Montana exhibits would be the central focus of all centers. A large, translucent, fiberglass relief map of Montana would be underlit to showcase the state. Interactive video presentations, keyed to the map, would be displayed on screens above the map. Cities, community events, attractions, campgrounds, national forests, national parks, state parks, and recreation areas would be featured.
Suggested funding sources: A cost-sharing plan involving the National Park Service, U.S. Forest Service, Bureau of of Land Management, Travel Montana, and the Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks. Appropriate private organizations, foundations and corporate sponsors should also be approached for funding and support.

Regional Exhibit – $77,000

Summary: This projected cost reflects only the cabinetry in the designated regional display area of each center. Completion of the displays would be the responsibility of various agencies and local communities. Total cost for completed displays has not been determined.

***Regional Exhibit** (continued)*
Suggested funding sources: A cost-sharing plan involving the Bureau of Land Management, U.S. Forest Service, local communities and organizations, and Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks. Appropriate private foundations and corporate sponsors should also be approached for funding and support.

Total Estimated Construction Costs – $6,005,500

Operational Funding

Staffing – $278,160

Summary: This expense includes paid staffing for each center, with an average of two supervisory staff and varying numbers of part-time staff. One full-time employee on Travel Montana's staff as the overall Visitor Information Center Coordinator is also included. Supplementary volunteer staff from each community is also projected, but at no additional expense.
Suggested funding sources: A cost-sharing plan involving the U.S. Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks, and Travel Montana. Local communities should be approached for assistance in providing the needed volunteer staffing.

Promotional Literature and Supplies – $362,840

Summary: This expense covers the promotional material that would be distributed to travelers at the Visitor Information Centers (vacation guides, travel planners, maps, etc.). Also included in this expense are miscellaneous office supplies.
Suggested funding sources: Travel Montana to fund the necessary state promotional material as published through the Travel Promotion Division. The Department of Highways would provide the necessary state maps, as required for distribution. All other agencies would be responsible for funding their specific promotional literature intended for distribution at Visitor Information Centers.

Training – $13,500

Summary: This training cost is for the staff hired to operate the Visitor Information Centers. Training would be provided through Travel Montana's Superhost program and familiarization tours conducted by local communities.
Suggested funding sources: Travel Montana to fund training efforts as an extension of the Superhost program. Local communities should be asked to assist with effective familiarization tours and should be approached for funding for any expenses associated with these tours.

Building and Grounds Maintenance and Utilities – $123,500

Summary: This expense includes upkeep costs associated with the Visitor Information Center buildings, as well as parking lot maintenance, grounds maintenance, and building utilities (power, water/sewer, and heat).
Suggested funding sources: The Department of Highways should provide funding for parking lots maintenance and snow removal services. Local communities should be responsible for grounds maintenance and upkeep. All remaining maintenance expenses should be funded by a cost-sharing plan involving the U.S. Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, and Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks.

Total Estimated Operating Costs – $778,000 annually

Architectural Concepts

The Concepts. The proposed architectural concepts for the Visitor Information Centers represent a vision of how Montana might best introduce visitors to its attractions, the diversity of its landscape, and rich culture.

To reflect this in the architectural proposals, the forms, materials and landscaping for each site were derived from the traditions and characteristics of the region in which the center would be located. These influences and specific site conditions would make each center visually unique.

Design and Layout Characteristics. Although exact sizes and arrangements vary slightly with each design, a visitor would typically arrive at a parking lot that serves both automobiles and recreational vehicles. This area and the short walk to the center itself would feature native plant and landscape materials labeled and described as part of the center's interpretive character.

Exterior access to rest rooms, which would include infant care facilities, would be provided immediately adjacent to the center's entrance. Upon entry, visitors would be greeted at a reception/ information counter and a nearby hospitality area, where they could lounge comfortably while reviewing maps and brochures, or they could simply have a cup of coffee and rest.

Close at hand and visible from the entry would be a large relief map of Montana and a video display system that would continuously feature regional promotions or respond to visitor inquiries. Beyond the state exhibit would lie a regional interpretive display of museum-quality artifacts and exhibits.

For more detailed information about both state and regional amenities, visitors could use the video theater, where staff would provide documentary or promotional videos from a state-wide selection. Subjects could vary from fly fishing techniques and streams to ghost towns, festivals, and the arts.

An office designed for two employees, with direct access to the reception/information counter, would accommodate the professional staff. A workroom for exhibition and display assembly, mailings and volunteers, in addition to generous storage space, would complete the staff area.

Size. Total square footage averages 5,200 square feet for the proposed Visitor Information Centers, a size similar to centers in Georgia, Nebraska, South Dakota, Wyoming, and Alberta. Relatively large VICs are proposed for several reasons. First, experience in other states has shown that many smaller centers must eventually be enlarged. Second, in order to attract more travelers, the centers must be large enough to accommodate the interpretive and information displays. Third, the Steering Committee attempted to meet the legislative mandate for a system that was "up-to-date and technology complete." Finally, the centers were designed to accommodate future expansion in services and interpretive programs.

Cost Factors. A survey of comparable facilities in the United States revealed an average cost of about $140 per square foot, plus architectural/ engineering fees and site development costs. This cost is a result of the need to build relatively small, high quality facilities at rather remote sites. The costs listed for each site are in 1990 dollars and include site development, building construction, architectural/ engineering fees, interior finishes, furnishings, landscaping, the Montana exhibit, display cabinetry for the regional interpretive exhibit, and a security system.

Dillon (I-15 South)

Proposed site: Several sites are under consideration; no final decision has yet been made.

Land acquisition costs: Because several sites are still being considered, no specific costs are available. However, the sites would probably be acquired through a multi-agency land exchange.

The community. Dillon is a community of about 4,000 people located 64 miles north of the Idaho line on Interstate-15. I-15 is the major entry point into Montana from southern Idaho, Utah, and the southwest U.S. Dillon is the largest town in the Beaverhead/Bighole area of southwest Montana.

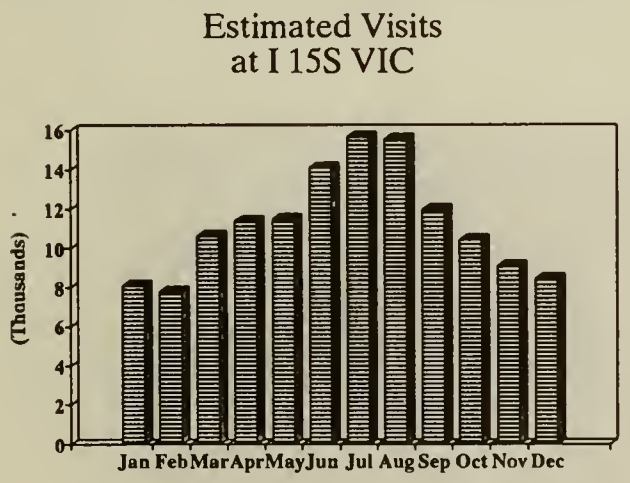
Visitor characteristics. Most visitors entering the state at this point are on vacation (57%), although many visitors (48%) are passing through. About 28% are visiting family or friends, and about 8% are on business or attending a convention. About one in ten vacationers come to fish, while about 12% are here to attend a special event. The typical length of stay is 1 night, and most visitors come from California (24%), Utah (14%), Idaho (12%), or Washington (12%).

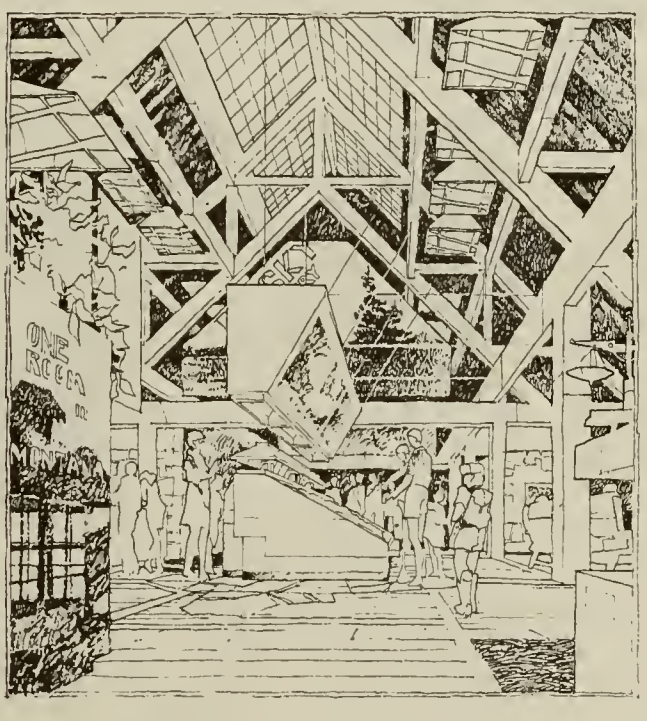
Cooperation and operation. A VIC in Dillon could be operated through a cooperative effort among the Beaverhead Chamber of Commerce, U.S. Forest Service, Bureau of Land Management, and Western Montana College. The Chamber of Commerce is willing to take over the day-to-day operation and administration of the center, although it does not have the financial resources to hire paid staff. WMC has agreed to help install and operate a telecommunications system linking the VIC to other VICs and to other federal, state, and local offices. The college will also attempt to provide student interns to help staff the center. The two federal agencies have expressed an interest in cooperating, but the extent of their involvement has not yet been finalized.

In response to the mountain environment and mining heritage of the region, the Dillon Visitor Information Center would feature a simple, but dramatic metal roof line and predominantly stone walls. A covered gate would mark the entry and call attention to the mountain "stream" passing under a footbridge. This water element would serve as an interpretive device for explaining placer mining techniques. Oriented to take full advantage of passive solar techniques, the compact building form would draw attention to the massive stone fireplace that awaits visitors inside.

The floor plan reflects the building's compact character with a centralized organization. Surrounding the Montana Exhibit are the reception/information counter to the north, regional exhibit to the west, and a hospitality hearth to the south. Heavy wood construction and the spaciousness of the high ceiling are obvious in the interior perspective. Copper light fixtures would represent the region's mining heritage.

Construction Budget Estimate: $971,000
Annual Operating Costs: $76,000
Season: April – October





Wibaux (I-94)

Proposed site: A parcel of donated land at the I-94 interchange on the east edge of Wibaux.

Land acquisition costs: None. The site would be acquired through a donation.

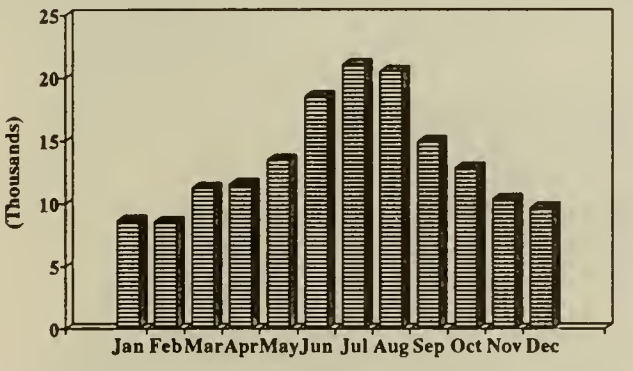
The community. Wibaux is a small community of about 800 people located 9 miles west of the North Dakota line on Interstate-94. Wibaux now operates a visitor center each summer, using one paid staffer and a number of senior citizen volunteers.

Visitor characteristics. Most visitors entering the state at this point are passing through (62%), and 52% are on vacation. About 28% are visiting family or friends, and 5% are on business or attending a convention. The typical length of stay is 1 to 2 nights, and visitors tend to come from Minnesota (17%), California (12%), Washington (9%), North Dakota (8%), or Wisconsin (8%).

Cooperation and operation. The land proposed for the VIC is presently in private ownership, and has been offered to the state free of charge by the owners, Jerome and Patricia Franks, for development of a VIC facility. The town council of Wibaux has expressed its willingness to help with water and sewer installation. The community has agreed to administer, manage, and operate the VIC, and provide a portion of the staffing and maintenance through the Chamber of Commerce and the Historical Society.

Reflecting the heritage of the first "sod busting" settlers of the Great Plains, the Wibaux Visitor Information Center would be an earth-integrated structure employing contemporary wind power generation. Projected against the skyline, the windmill would be a symbol for the center and visible from the east to visitors approaching the Interstate exit. The exposed retaining walls wrapping around a cottonwood oasis would be finished in an extraordinary volcanic stone found locally. With a site high above Beaver Creek that offers exceptional vistas to the west and south, a viewing platform at the base of the windmill would highlight the visitor's exterior experience.

Estimated Visits
at I 94 VIC



A central reception/information counter would greet visitors as they entered, with the Montana exhibit immediately visible to the left. To the right would be a video theater and a hospitality seating area and regional exhibit. The museum quality and interpretive character of this regional exhibit is representative of the concept to be used for all of the visitor information centers.

The site plan illustrates the emphasis placed on the landscape and interpretative exhibits, which would focus on native prairie plants and animals. The walkway from the car to the entrance would be a gentle climb adjacent to a running stream, with plants and geological features labeled and described.

Construction Budget Estimate: $905,000
Annual Operating Costs: $89,000
Season: April – October

Hardin (I-90 East)

Proposed site: Two-acre parcel of land on the grounds of the Big Horn County Historical Museum, near the south Hardin interchange on I-90.

Land acquisition costs: None. The site would be acquired through a donation.

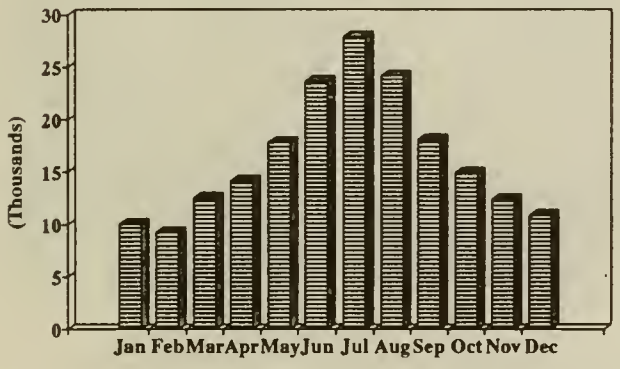
The community. Hardin is a community of about 3,200 people located 58 miles north of the Wyoming state line and 39 miles south of Billings along Interstate-90.

Visitor characteristics. Visitors entering the state at this point are most often on vacation (54%), although 39% are passing through. About 32% are also visiting family or friends, and about 14% are on business or attending a convention. About 15% of vacationers come here to fish, while 20% are here to attend a special event. The typical length of stay is about 2 nights, and visitors tend to come from Washington (12%), Colorado (11%), Michigan (7%), or Wyoming (7%).

Cooperation and operation. Bighorn County is willing to donate land adjacent to its historical museum for construction of a VIC. A parcel of land near the Interstate and adjacent to the historical museum is available. The museum would administer the site and help construct exhibits for the center. The museum might also be able to operate the VIC beyond the proposed season. Bighorn County might be able to provide some level of in-kind contribution toward construction, such as site preparation work.

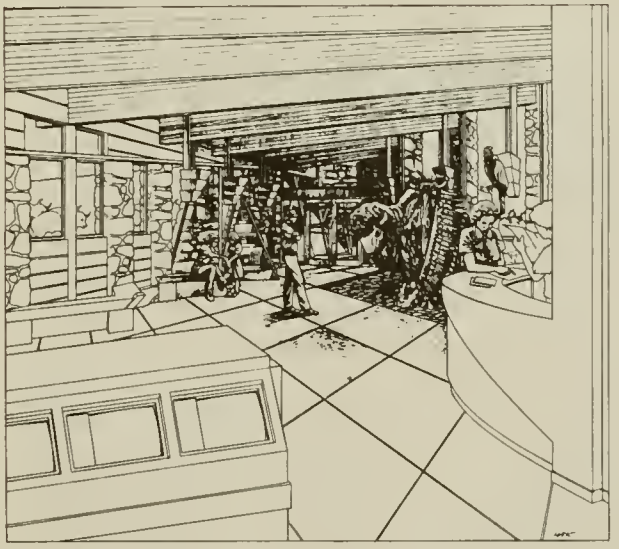
With a proposed site next to the Bighorn County Historical Museum, the Hardin Visitor Information Center would be an intermediary between the artifacts of white settlement now featured at the museum and the Native American exhibit planned for the future. The architectural character of the center would reflect both cultures yet is designed to distinguish it from museum artifacts.

Estimated Visits
at I 90 East VIC



The visitor would proceed through the regional exhibit to the reception/information counter. The state exhibit would be to the visitor's right and the video theater would be behind and to the left of the counter. Additional office space would be included for museum staff. The interior perspective illustrates the traditional building materials and intimate scale.

Construction Budget Estimate: $1,131,900
Annual Operating Costs: $134,000
Season: Year-round



Haugan/St. Regis (I-90 West)

Proposed site: U.S. Forest Service Savenac Tree Nursery, Haugan I-90 exit or St. Regis area

Land acquisition costs: None. The Savenac site would be leased from the U.S. Forest Service under a Memorandum of Understanding for no cost. Costs of acquiring an alternative site have not been determined.

The proposal for the I-90 West entrance is based on a site at the U.S. Forest Service Savenac nursery. However, other sites and location are still being considered and, if selected, may use the visitor center design proposed for the Dillon and Shelby sites.

The community. Haugan is a small community located along I-90 and the St.Regis River 16 miles east of the Idaho state line. About 200 yards from the Interstate is an existing U.S. Forest Service facility known as the Savenac tree nursery. The Lolo National Forest has offered this site to be used as a Visitor Information and Interpretation Center.

Visitor characteristics. Visitors who enter the state at this point are often passing though (56%), on vacation (48%), and/or visiting family or friends (26%). About 9% are here on business or attending a convention, while about 11% of vacationers are in Montana to attend a special event. The typical length of stay is 1 to 2 nights. Many visitors come from Washington (37%), California (8%), or Idaho (5%).

Cooperation and operation. The Savenac tree nursery site has been nominated to the National Register of Historic Places and would be ideal for picnicking and interpretive activities. The former administration building, although in good shape, is no longer used by the Forest Service. A self-guided interpretive nature trail could easily be built on the site, incorporating the tree nursery activities, the Arboretum, the historic Mullen Trail, which passes directly through the site, and a stone bridge built by the CCC that is on the Historic Register.

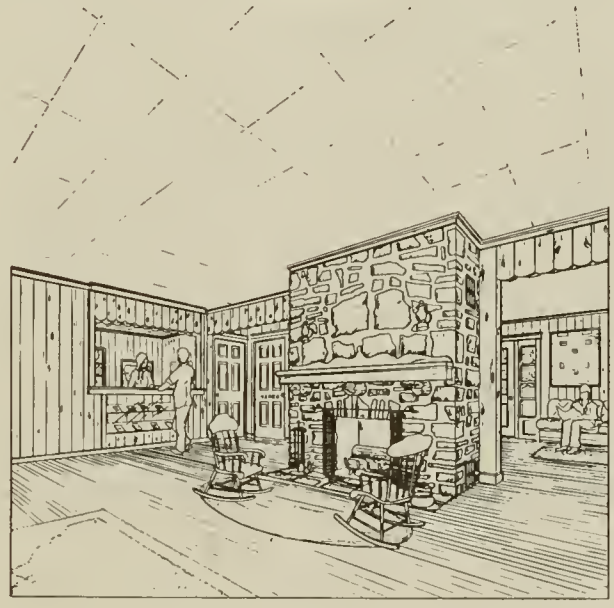
The Forest Service has used volunteers in past summers to help care for the site and provide information to visitors. There are three full-size RV/trailer sites on the site, complete with water, sewer, and electric hook-ups. These could accommodate volunteers who wish to live on-site in the summer and help staff the center. Current plans propose renovating the Savenac Administration building, along with two adjacent residences, into a State and Forest Service Visitor Information and Interpretation facility. New construction on the site would be limited to a rest room facility and expanded parking. A self-guided nature and historic interpretation trail is proposed for the site as well.

The principal goals of the design for the Haugan Visitor Information Center were to minimize the impact of new facilities on a national historic site and re-use as many of the existing facilities as possible. To achieve this, we propose new rest rooms at the southeast corner of the developed site and adjacent parking for automobiles, with additional parking for recreational vehicles and overflow to the east in an existing meadow.

Estimated Visits
at I 90 West VIC

The impact on the historic site would be minimal. Three buildings would be restored and remodeled to accommodate the functions of the Visitor Information Center. The existing administrative building would be remodeled to serve as the reception/information counter, hospitality area, and video theater. The building to the east of the old administration building would become the Montana exhibit, and the Forest Service would remodel the building to the west for a local exhibit featuring the Savenac site and arboretum. The only new building proposed would house the rest rooms.

Construction Budget Estimate: $529,000
Annual Operating Costs: $208,000
Season: Year-round



West Yellowstone (Highway 191)

***Proposed site*:** Parcel of city land adjacent to Yellowstone National Park entrance, at the corner of Yellowstone Ave. and Canyon St., or the city park site in the center of town.

Land acquisition costs: None. The site would be provided by the City of West Yellowstone; the precise mechanism has not yet been determined.

The community. West Yellowstone is a small, tourism-oriented community of about 700 people located at the west boundary of Yellowstone National Park. The local Chamber of Commerce currently operates a small visitor information center in town, though it is widely recognized that a larger facility is needed. The nearest National Park Service visitor center is 30 miles into Yellowstone N.P.at Old Faithful.

Visitor characteristics. Most visitors entering the state at this point are on vacation (77%) and/or visiting family or friends (30%). Only about 21% are passing through, and about 7% are on business or attending a convention. Almost one-third of vacationers come to fish, while 15% are here to attend a special event. The typical length of stay is 2 to 3 nights, and most visitors tend to come from California (23%), Utah (9%), Idaho (9%), or Washington (7%).

Cooperation and operation. The nearest U.S. Forest Service visitor center is about 28 miles away at Quake Lake. Neither this center nor the one at Old Faithful interprets the Greater Yellowstone

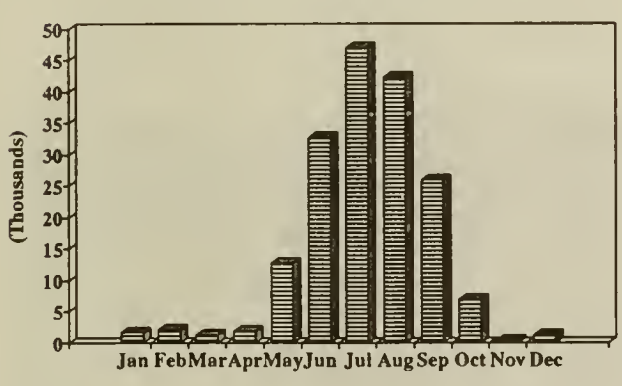
Ecosystem as a region, and neither provides much information on additional recreational opportunities in the ecosystem or in Montana as a whole. There is considerable opportunity in West Yellowstone for a joint venture with the city, the Chamber of Commerce, the U.S.Forest Service and the National Park Service.

The Chamber of Commerce has for several years proposed a new visitor information center facility. The National Park Service and the U.S. Forest Service have been solicited for help in funding the center. These agencies would then occupy and help operate the facility. At this time, these agencies have expressed an interest in some type of cooperative venture, but they have not been able to make any firm commitments

The Visitor Information Center for West Yellowstone was designed to reflect the unique architectural heritage of the park system. High pitched roofs, stone walls, exterior breezeways and large expanses of glass would commemorate this tradition, in conjunction with dense native landscaping.

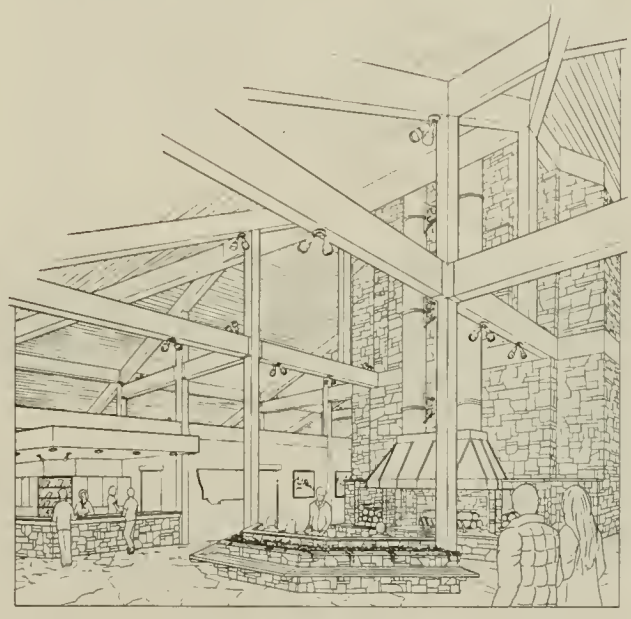
The final element capturing the spirit of traditional park architecture would be realized when the visitor steps into the center and experiences the massive stone hearth, fireplace and cooper hood, complemented by heavy wood columns and beams. The site plan and floor plan illustrate how different the scope of this center would be from the other centers in the state, primarily because of the number of visitors who would use it.

Estimated Visits
at West Yellowstone VIC



The center would be approximately 9,000 square feet and include an outdoor amphitheater, 50-seat video theater and offices for the Chamber of Commerce and Montana Reservation System operators. Its functional organization would parallel that of other centers, with a reception/information counter to the left as visitors entered and Montana exhibit to the right. The video theater would be acoustically isolated behind the hearth, and a large regional exhibit focusing on the Greater Yellowstone Ecosystem would be located beyond the Montana Exhibit.

Construction Budget Estimate: $1,415,200
Annual Operating Costs: $125,000
Season: Year-round



Shelby (I-15 North)

Proposed Site: Parcel of county land adjacent to Interstate 15 at north Shelby interchange

Land acquisition costs: The site would be leased from Toole County for a net cost of $1 a year.

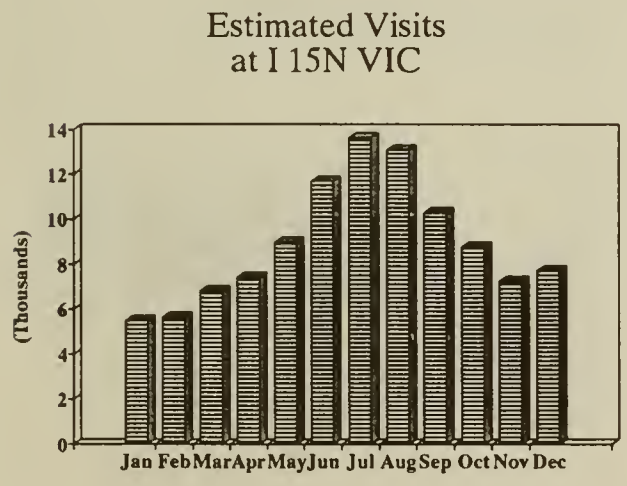
The community. Shelby is a community of about 3,100 people located 35 miles south of the Alberta line at the junction of I-15 and Highway 2. It is the first relatively large town encountered by people traveling south on I-15 from Canada.

Visitor characteristics. Most visitors entering the state at this point are on vacation (58%), although 43% are passing through. Only about 9% are visiting family or friends, and about 3% are on business trips or attending a convention. About 15% of vacationers are here to attend a special event. Typical length of stay is 1 to 2 nights; most visitors come from either Alberta (62%) or Ontario (6%).

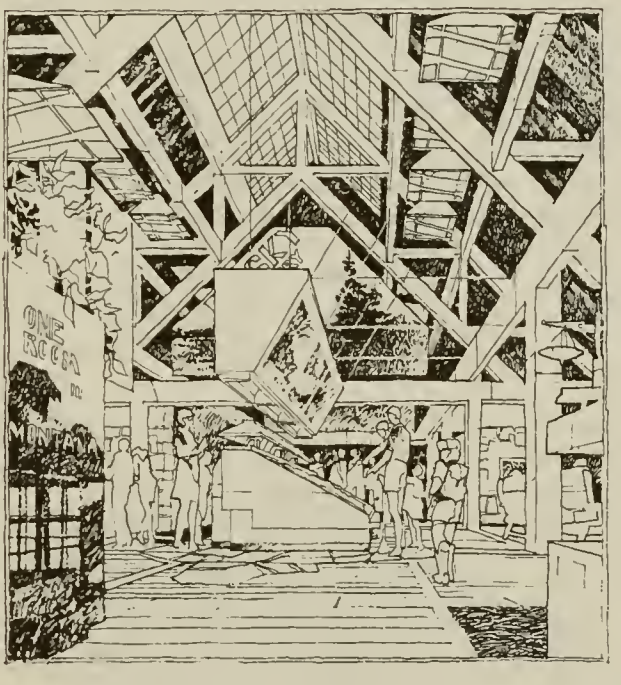
Cooperation and operation. The site is adjacent to the Interstate. Access from the Interstate interchange is very close and easy; site topography is good, and there is an excellent scenic vista of the Rocky Mountain Front to the west. The Toole County Commissioners are willing to execute a 20-year lease, extended indefinitely at 10- year intervals, on a parcel of county property near the north Shelby interchange on I-15.

Toole County would lease the site for $201 per year; the Shelby Chamber of Commerce would pay $200 per year to the county for the lease, leaving the state to pay only $1 per year. The Chamber would also fund 1/2 of a full-time staff salary, coordinate possible volunteer staff, and be responsible for the day-to-day management of the VIC. The City of Shelby and/or the county would help provide water main extensions to the site and assist in site preparation. A septic field would be necessary, as there is no sewer hookup available.

Visitors entering the state from the north would pass the Shelby Visitor Center, which would parallel the Interstate before exiting. The building and site features would thus act as a sign, enticing the visitor traveling 65 miles per hour to stop and investigate. The center's interpretive theme would be the visual panorama of the plains meeting the Rockies to the west. A very large hedgerow of deciduous trees would be planted adjacent to the Interstate, just as ranchers have traditionally marked their homesteads in the plains. The trees and a large, landscaped, earth-mound sign would create a powerful horizontal image, providing a contrast for the buildings' vertical character and recalling again the relationship between the plains and the Rockies.



The floor plan represents a prototypical design adapted from the proposed Dillon model. Surrounding the Montana Exhibit are the reception/information counter to the north, regional exhibit to the west, and a hospitality hearth to the south. Heavy wood construction and the spaciousness of the high ceiling are obvious in the interior perspective.
Construction Budget Estimate: $975,000
Annual Coperating Costs: $89,000
Season: April – December



Culbertson (Highway 2)

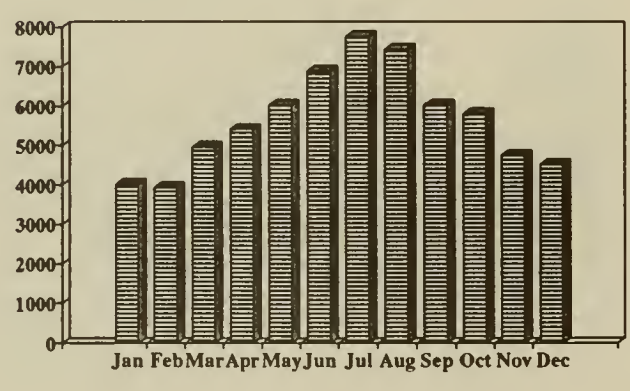
Proposed Site: Historical Museum on Highway 2 east of Culbertson

Land acquisition costs: None. The space in the museum would be donated.

The community. Culbertson is a community of about 850 people located 23 miles west of the North Dakota line at the junction of Highways 2 and 16.

Visitor characteristics. Many people traveling west to Glacier National Park from North Dakota and the Lake States pass through Culbertson, as well as Canadian visitors traveling south from the Regina area. While traffic volume on Highway 2 is not sufficient to warrant building an entirely new VIC facility, this is an important point of entry into Montana, and some increased level of visitor information is needed.

Estimated Visits
at US 2E VIC



Cooperation and operation. There is an opportunity here to work cooperatively with the newly formed Museum Club in Culbertson to provide visitor information. The Museum Club has purchased a building on the east edge of Culbertson on Highway 2 to serve as a regional historical museum, and space is available for the state to provide information to the traveling public.

Cost to the state would be relatively minimal, since the club has already purchased the building. The state would fund one full-time staff person, and would contribute to the maintenance and utility costs of operating the museum. The Museum Club would be responsible for day-to-day operations.

Budget Estimate: $78,400
Annual Operating Costs: $32,000
Season: April – October

Future Expansion

The VIC system proposed here is designed to meet the Legislature's mandate that it be technologically complete and up-to-date. Future expansion would meet the demands of the Montana traveler. The proposed VICs have been designed to be responsive to future state-of-the-art innovations.

Several additions are recommended. First, each VIC could be linked to the others to assist travelers in finding information about attractions, events, and sources not found in the immediate region of that particular entry into Montana. This network could also be linked to other offices, such as the Department of Fish, Wildlife and Parks and the National Park Service, to provide access to information about campground occupancy, local conditions, and so forth. The network could also provide up-to-date information on road and weather conditions.

Second, touch-screen computer terminals could be used to provide visitors with more detailed information about specific opportunities, events, and services. Such terminals might also include a direct link to campground and accommodations reservations.

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